

Highlights and Lessons from my Freshman Year in the State Assembly

My status as a “freshman” Assemblymember ended a few days ago with the final vote of 2007: the Assembly’s passage of historic healthcare reform legislation. It came a little over a year after my swearing-in, which now seems like a lifetime ago. As the final days of 2007 slip away, it’s a good time to reflect on my freshman journey – the highs, lows, and most importantly, the lessons to carry forward.

In terms of legislation, it was definitely a good year with the Governor signing several of my bills into law. This includes two of the year’s most important environmental bills: AB 1470, creating the nation’s largest incentive program for solar hot water heaters; and AB 1109, authorizing the nation’s strongest efficiency and toxics reduction standards for lighting products (and helping shape the recently passed federal Energy Bill). The Governor also signed my bills extending breast cancer research funding (AB 28), promoting water recycling (AB 1406) and water efficiency in building standards (AB 1560), expanding disabled parking access (AB 463), and a bill I jointly authored with Assemblymembers Berg and Garcia promoting more routine HIV testing (AB 682).

As Chairman of the Committee on Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials, I worked to advance several groundbreaking public health protections. Notable among them was a bill by Assemblymember Fiona Ma which I co-authored (AB 1108) banning reproductive toxins called phthalates from toys and other children’s products.

There were also disappointments. My bill to increase flexibility for high performing schools (AB 494), after passing both houses with bipartisan support, was vetoed by the Governor who didn’t think it was needed. The defeat of the “Clean Cars” bill (AB 493) was also disappointing. I was principal co-author with Assemblymember Ira Ruskin on this bill, which would have created a greenhouse gas reduction fee/rebate for new vehicles, adding a surcharge for higher emissions vehicles, while rewarding people with money back for low emissions vehicles. We fell three votes short in the Assembly, unable to overcome fierce opposition from the automobile industry.

I learned that a veto doesn’t necessarily mean failure. Take AB 1743, a bill I wrote in collaboration with Senator Carole Migden and Supervisor Steve Kinsey to stop the proposed expansion of San Quentin’s Death Row until completion of a study on alternative inmate housing strategies. Legislative support for this bill was enough to initiate the study by the State Auditor, and even though the Governor vetoed the bill, its passage in the legislature sent a clear message: funding for Death Row expansion won’t be provided until the state reassesses this project in light of the study results. My goals were achieved, notwithstanding the veto.

In addition to San Quentin, high priority district issues included working with other elected officials to secure funding for HOV lanes through the Novato Narrows, leading the fight against a proposed mega-Casino in Rohnert Park, and most recently, dealing with the impacts of the Cosco Busan oil spill and identifying reforms that can prevent such tragedies from happening in the future.

2007 concluded with two major developments that will shape the year to come. First, the Assembly's passage of what is arguably the most comprehensive health care reform bill in history. While not perfect, this compromise between the Governor and legislative Democrats would cover 70% of California's estimated 5.1 million uninsured, including 800,000 children. Second, the Governor's announcement that he will declare a fiscal emergency in January to address a potential \$14 billion budget deficit next year. Much of my work in 2008 will be about resolving this crisis and hopefully using it as an opportunity to implement fiscal reforms to end our chronic "boom-bust" budget cycles.

Looking back, I couldn't have asked for a better first year -- not just in terms of legislative results and lessons learned, but also the many working relationships forged with people throughout my district. From schools, farms and businesses, to senior communities and nonprofits serving the developmentally disabled -- people opened their doors and hearts to deepen my understanding of the district's needs, and that has made me a better representative.

Thank you for this opportunity to reflect on 2007, and for the great honor of representing you in the Assembly.